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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how undergraduate university teachers are thinking in the classroom about the theoretical and practical contents related to the subject called "Curriculum Studies." The study focuses on the aspects of the theory-practice relationship, the idea of curriculum, and the theoretical references used by the undergraduate teachers. The research used multiple case studies, examining six different classrooms using ethnographic techniques--basically classroom observation and interviews. Two courses at a federal university, two at a state university, and two at a private institutions in the Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) area were classrooms of study. Two observers were in each classroom for a period of four hours every week. From the data collected, courses tended to be divided into two parts, the theoretical one and the practical one. Concepts of curriculum are presented at the beginning of the course, but the problem arises with a variety of definitions of terms from various texts. No authors are considered to be "classical" in the field of education. The paper concludes there is no consensus about what should be taught in a course on "curriculum studies." (Contains 19 references.) (EH)

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CURRICULUM STUDIES IN BRASIL: A STUDY OF THE TEACHING PRACTICE[1]

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Purpose

The subject that we are analysing "Curriculum Studies" is part of the syllabus of the undergraduate course in "Pedagogy" at Brazilian universities. The pedagogy course in the universities analysed prepares supervisors, advisors, and specialists in education to take their first degree and who will work at elementary and high schools. From a historical point of view, this subject was included in the syllabus in 1969 and became a mandatory course to be taken by all those taking a degree as supervisors in education. This subject is taught by university teachers from the Education Department at Brazilian universities. Recently, this course has been reformulated and its disciplines have been viewed in a more generalistic approach.

All students of the courses at the universities analysed by the research project we are reporting here, took also a degree to teach in a Teacher Education Program at high school level, and "Curriculum Studies" played an important role in these programs. Fifty

[1] This study is part of a joint research project conducted by Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro and Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro entitled "Educational Transfer and Curriculum", financed by CNPq (National Research Council) and coordinated by A. F. Moreira and M .I. Marcondes.

percent (50%) of the students taking this course were already elementary school teachers. All the university teachers investigated had a Master's degree, but were not engaged in any kind of research and were not doing any post-graduate course.

The main purpose of this research was to analyse how undergraduate university teachers have been thinking, within the classroom, about the theoretical and practical contents related to the subject called "Curriculum Studies", by focusing on the following aspects: (a) theory-practice relation; (b) the idea of curriculum and (c) the theoretical references used by these undergraduate teachers.

We will first outline the theoretical framework and the methodological assupmtions of our research.

Theoretical Framework

When we tried to analyse the teaching history of the subject curriculum in Brazil early in the 1990s, we dealt with two levels of concern : (a) how a certain subject imposes itself and remains in a course syllabus; and (b) how, in the field of curriculum theory, theory and practice combine.

The work by Layton et al. cited in Goodson (1981, 1988) indicates the existence of three stages in the development of school subjects, which we took as references in our analysis of "Curriculum Studies". According to these authors, the subjects are inserted in a curriculum because of their immediate practical usefulness, tending to ward off such practice with a view to attaining higher academic status.

In the field of curriculum theory, such movement from practical knowledge to academic knowledge can also be noticed. The need for "Curriculum Studies" comes close to the need to solve practical situations in the school context. When the field starts to gain higher academic status it becomes dissociated from practice.

Pinar et al. (1995) also points out with different stages in the curriculum practice. At the first stage, the area was concerned with "curriculum development". One of the most important authors of that moment was Tyler (1949), and the major concepts then adopted were curriculum objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of curriculum. According to Pinar et al. (1995) these concepts were developed in a period in which population as well as school buildings were growing significantly, and keeping the curriculum organized was one of the main concerns of professional activity - that was a time of "curriculum development". At that time, the writing about curriculum, intented to give guidance, in a practical way for those who worked in schools, people who wanted to know "how to do" their work.

This notion came to a crisis in the 1970s, when some authors tried to reconceptualize the field, against the traditional approach. "The reconceptualization was a fragile, diverse coalition of individuals many of whose interests intersected. The sense in which the term was accurate was that it conveyed a shared purpose among ideologically diverse individuals in redoing curriculum studies", quoting Pinar (1988).

According to Pinar and Bowers (1992), scholars who had embraced the economic version of reproduction in 1970, by the early 1980s started to critize it and tried to develop a theory of resistence. The concept of reproduction began to be viewed as deterministic and lacking a concept of agency. There seemed to be little hope for significant change apart from alterations in the economic base and this brought a strong pessimism among scholars and teachers.

At that period authors like Apple (1979) and Giroux (1983) tried to overcome the reproductive approach and tried to see the potential power of schools in a divided society. Both had many of their books translated into Portuguese and published in Brazil. This corresponds to a moment of reaction to the pessimism provoked by the adoption of reproductivist theories. Apple's contribution to curriculum studies has been very important

in Brazil, especially from the political point of view. His elaboration of concepts like "hidden curriculum", "hegemony", and "resistence theory", form important elements of contemporary curriculum studies. Giroux, influenced by the Frankfurt School, brought to the curriculum theory concepts like ideology, culture and resistence, which became central theoretical statements in the field.

In the 1990s a radical change occurred with the adoption of critical theories, which proposed that the area should be more concerned with "understanding" the field.

> "...The field no longer sees the problem of curriculum and teaching as "technical" problems, that is, as problems of "how to". The contemporany field regards the problems of curriculum and teaching as "why" problems. Such a view requires that we understand what was before considered only something to be solved. Now the contemporary field is hardly against solving problems, but the view today is that solutions to problems do not just require knee-jerk, commonsensical responses, but careful, thoughtful, subject understanding".(Pinar et al., p.8)

In theoretical terms, the 1990s crisis reflects some perplexity before reality. What we are trying to understand is how such perplexity has penetrated "Curriculum Studies" in the Brazilian context.

Research Methodology

This research can be defined as a "multiple case study"(Yin, 1985). The "case" that was analysed was "the teaching practice in the course of Curriculum Studies" in the Pedagogy course. As this analysis of "teaching practice" took place in 6 different situations (6 different classrooms) we can consider it a kind of multiple case study. We used ethnographic techniques in this research - basically classroom observation and interviews.

Following the methodology proposed by LeCompe and Goetz (1984) who define ethnography as an analytical description of a social group, by outlining their beliefs, practices, and patterns of behavior.

The choice of the observation technique was due to the advantages of this method, which enables direct contact with the phenomenon studied, as well as the re-elaboration of initial discussions. The observers registered everything that happened during class time carefully and in detail.

We have observed the classes of six "Curriculum Studies" courses of Universities of the Rio de Janeiro area (two courses at a federal university, two at a state university and two at private institutions). The observation lasted for one academic term, a total of 60 hours per course. There were two observers in each classroom for a period of four hours every week.

These data were taken to the team research weekly to be discussed. These discussions were the starting point for the selection of the main points to be analysed, and in the second stage we concentrated on the observation of these points. We also established the main points for the interviews with the research team.

As we were doing a team investigation, observations could be done in groups of two observers. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) emphasize the importance of this kind of observation, which allows triangulation between field observers, a higher degree of flexibility in investigation strategies and practices, as well as the advantage of the several researchers' various personal skills.

In order to achieve the highest degree of trustworthiness and validation, the group of observers would regularly meet the research co-ordinators for analysis and criticism of their field perfomance.

During the academic term the researchers held semi-structured interviews with the university teachers in charge of the courses observed, considering that they were "key informants" - as LeCompe and Goetz put it - because of their position in the group investigation, thus leading to the emergence of several variables as yet unknown to the researchers.

The results of these observations enabled us to make a list of issues to be covered, rising also a few questions. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) "Nor do ethnographers restrict themselves to a single mode of questioning. On different occasions, or at different points in the same interview, the approach may not be non-directive or directive, depending on the function that the questioning is intended to serve."(p.113)

All the University teachers have been interviewed and the questions proposed were related to the nature of the subject, main goals and important contents of "Curriculum Studies"; to the books and texts recommended to the students; to the major educational questions discussed during the academic term, to the contribution of the subject to face educacional problems, as well as to the dificulties to deal with a "Curriculum Studies" course.

The interviewers tried to behave as active listeners, trying to listen to what was being said in order to assess how it would relate to the research focus and how it could reflect in the circumstances of the interview. During the interview the university teachers interviewed also explained what they planned to do in their courses as well as why they adopted certain texts books. This material was also analysed later by the research team.

We thus tried to examine the theoretical as well as the practical approach of these courses.

Data Sources

The categories of the analysis emerged from the discussions of the research team, taking as starting points data collected from field observation and interviews. Our data refer to three aspects basically: theory-practice relation, the idea of curriculum and bibliographical references used.

Theory-Practice Relation - According to the data collected during the field work the six (6) courses observed during term-time were divided, by the university teachers, into two parts: The first part of the course was considered to be the theoretical one ; and the second the practical one. The former should be understood as the background to put forward a curriculum proposal - "to develop a curriculum proposal", said the University teachers. This curriculum proposal was a plan for an idealized group of students (white, middle-class, well-educated) including curriculum objectives, contents, classroom activities and evaluation procedures, conforming to the Tylerian approach. This was, for the University teachers we investigated, the most significant demand on the part of the University students, considering its technical aspects and the fact that it was one of the major points of the program to be developed. The "development of a curriculum proposal" then consisted of an activity assigned at the end of the term, to which everything that had been taught during the course should converge. According to one of the University teachers:

> *"The students come to our course on Curriculum Studies wanting to know how to prepare a curriculum plan. It seems that all they want to know is the technique for preparing this curriculum plan. But I tell them from the beginning that the curriculum is strongly related to the views one has on society, education, and particularly of the students. Therefore, I start with a study of fundamental issues and tell them we are working on the theoretical foundations of curriculum."*

In this respect, one of the University teachers expressed herself in the following manner, during the interview:

"I am not an expert on the theory of curriculum, I think that what is essential is to develop a curriculum proposal, as this is the kind of work teachers usually carry out in the basic schools."

Another University teacher, thus defended, in a diferent way, her point of view:

"Students want everything ready for them. Perhaps this is the greatest difficulty I find in my course. It is hard to make them understand the political focus of the curriculum. When we talk about a ***political pedagogical project****, they think it has to do with the government policy. Students usually expect they would have a kind of conservative University teacher, teaching some ready stuff."*

This reveals that, in the courses which were observed, theory and practice were not integrated, but were mere juxtaposition of two poles, theoretical and practical knowledge. We will come back to this point later.

Idea of Curriculum - According to the data from classroom observation concepts of curriculum would be presented at the beginning of the course. Most University teachers were working with a list of definitions by different authors, some of them traditional ones (according to Pinar et al.: Tyler and Taba); others critical ones(according to Pinar et al.: Apple, Giroux, and others). One of the University teachers that presented the list at the beginning of the course defended his point of view this way: *"I make a list of definitions because, by doing so, I can give the student an overall idea of the field"*. However, we believe that the superficial contact with the definitions does not lead to a real understanding of the paradigms to which they refer.

These definitions were presented in such a way, that they were unrelated to the theoretical context in which they originated. Concepts issuing from different paradigms would be often mixed up, yet this aspect was not submitted to a more careful analysis. These concepts were viewed in a fragmented and isolated manner, without a full study of the basic principles of the approaches from which they derive. On reaching the end of the course, the students had an incomplete and, sometimes confusing, idea of what a "curriculum" was all about, and found it difficult to make the difference between categories like "official curriculum" (Goodson, 1988) and "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 1979).

The list of the definitions made by the several University teachers observed included the concept of hidden curriculum (Apple,1979). This concept would be then dealt with, by being separated from the principles of a "critical theory", dettached from the basic assumptions of a critical conception. This kind of work may lead one to vague interpretations without a consistent knowledge of the author's own ideas.

Theoretical References Used - According to data from classroom observations and interviews in the 1990s, it has been verified that there are no authors considered "classical" in the field. During the 1980s, in a research carried out by Moreira (1990), it was verified that the university teachers of the undergraduate courses of "Curriculum Studies" often recommended texts of authors considered to be traditional ones in the field, like Tyler (1949) and Taba (1972). These authors were used as "classical" textbooks, which offered practical guidelines for the elaboration of a curriculum proposal as regards the choice of goals, teaching procedures and the process of evaluation. Now, data collected showed that there is an adoption of a varied number of authors, among whom some that were of use to the course's theoretical foundations, yet they did not view the curriculum as their major focus of interest and analysis. That being so, they hardly present clear elaboration principles, thus failing to provide enough aid for the practical work required at the end of the course, namely to elaborate a curriculum proposal for a certain group of students at a given school. This eclecticism shows lack of consensus about the basic aspects to be taken

in consideration in the elaboration of a curriculum proposal. There seems to be a kind of crisis in the way university teachers at undergraduate courses on "Curriculum Studies" deal with curriculum literature. They do not use traditional texts as giving foundations any more, they are looking for texts of curriculum authors that have a critical approach, but who can also give hints for the practical work at schools.

Conclusions

It is not clear what must be dealt with in an undergraduate course on "Curriculum Studies" whose students will work in elementary and high schools.

One of the main conclusions after analysing our data is that at the universities studied, there is no consensus about what shoud be taught in a course on "Curriculum Studies". What kind of knowledge - either theoretical or pratical - shoud be the object of study in a course on "Curriculum Studies"? We will explain how we reached this conclusion, through the analysis of theory-practice relation, the idea of curriculum and the theoretical references used.

Through the analysis of theory-practice relation in the courses in which observation took place we found a kind of relation marked by juxtaposition of what is considered theoretical knowledge to what was considered practical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge turns to be the philosophical, sociological or psychological foundations of a curriculum proposal. But there was no consensus on which of these knowledge area was more appropriate for this task.

Curriculum experts in Brazil may be interested in studying new approaches in order to "understand" the field (Moreira and Marcondes, 1997) but Brazilian University teachers use the philosophical, sociological and psychological literature to give grounds to the practical task of elaborating curriculum proposals. Theory is then considered with the specific aim of helping to give grounds to a practical work and not in a speculative sense.

Academics may be interested in developing the field theoretically, even hoping to attain higher academic "status"for the field of curriculum. Meanwhile, university teachers have a kind of urgent need to make the theory-practice connection.

Practical knowledge to be obtained during the course is considered useful by University teachers for the elaboration of curriculum proposals. These teachers see as their main task to prepare their students for the elaboration of a curriculum proposal. Should this really be the main task of an educator? This demand the students make represents the need of getting a recipe to solve problems. Most of the time they go to the university campus willing to get magic solutions to their practical problems. Is the elaboration of curriculum proposals really going to improve educational action? Are detailed curriculum proposals going to lead to a real improvement of educational action?

As regards the idea of curriculum there is an implicit consensus that it is important to give an overview of the different definitions of curriculum. The University teachers think that it is important to present different authors to the students. But we see this kind of classroom activity with caution because of the way it is done - the overview - as it was documented in the observations. We think it leads to an oversimplification of theories and theoretical approaches. Different concepts were mixed together and were viewed in a fragmented and isolated manner, without a full study of the basic assumptions of the theories from which they derive. This may lead the students to make vague interpretations without a consistent knowledge of the author's own ideas.

The theoretical references used are eclectic. Not only curriculum authors or experts in the field are used in the courses of "Curriculum Studies". Data showed lack of consensus on the basic aspects to be taken in consideration in the course, not even consensus about the theoretical kowledge regarding how to elaborate a curriculum proposal. The theoretical approach used was generic and vague differing from course to course. The texts used to give practical knowledge have adopted implicitly or explicitly the Tylerian paradigm.

These two kinds of literature did not match. during the courses they were simply juxtaposed.

Such lack of consensus can be understood on the basis of a tension between "development" and "understanding" the curriculum field (Pinar, 1995). The students at the end of the course, expect to be able to develop a curriculum proposal, a task they think will be required in their professional activity. The University teachers try to respond to this demand. They use, as theoretical references for this task, texts of critical authors of the field or material in which curriculum is not the main focus. Nevertheless, when they are pressed by the students for curriculum development, all they can give are traditional curriculum guidelines. This section of the course is centered on administrative aspects. The majority of the University teachers do not manage to integrate the theoretical principles that they work with, during the course, into the scientific patterns presented. Although authors such as Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962) are not discussed during the course, their principles are implicit in the guidance given by the teachers to their students. The readiness with which teachers combine the critical authors with the Tylerian rationality could be explained by the readiness with which this pattern is shown to be suitable for any kind of philosophy as Kliebard (in Pinar et al.,1995)has already pointed out.

The main challenge seems to be how to integrate the practical need the students feel of how to elaborate a curriculum proposal with a theoretical and critical approach showing that this proposal cannot be elaborated in a narrow way, but must result from a more complete view of the whole educational process and of the teaching situation the students will be facing when they become teachers or supervisors.

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